

chicagotribune.com

School nutrition and gardening classes aim to grow healthy eating habits

Food groups working with Chicago schools say food and education go hand in hand

By Monica Eng, Tribune reporter

12:19 PM CDT, April 14, 2010

Chicago Public Schools officials have announced new, healthier school lunch menus, but a big question remains.

Will kids eat them?

As British chef Jamie Oliver (whose ABC TV show, "Food Revolution," documents his attempt to improve school food in West Virginia) recently learned, getting kids to embrace healthy fare after years of junk food takes work.

But nutrition advocates believe there is a key to unlocking their jaws and minds to better food: education.

Most experts say having access to healthy food and access to education about why it's healthy will influence eating behavior, said Gary Cuneen, executive director of Seven Generations Ahead, an advocacy group that offers food workshops to students and teachers.

Yet, the Chicago school district offers no mandatory nutrition education as part of its curriculum. Nutrition materials are available to teachers who want them.

Enter the private sector.

Communities in Chicago Schools, a nonprofit that connects volunteer professionals to 170 Chicago schools, has seen demand for nutrition classes nearly triple in the past four years. Executive director Jane Metzinger said she thinks that might be because of the results of a Personal Health Inventory her organization has administered to more than 5,000 Chicago students.

The lowest-scoring area was nutrition, she said, and when Metzinger shows the data to principals, "They get it. They see that these are their kids, not some students from a distant national survey."

The principals, she said, also recognize that better nutrition "is going to help them with academic gains," so they make the time to fit the information into their class day.

That doesn't mean simply handing out copies of the food pyramid. Cuneen said policies on preventing childhood obesity have shown that information without a connection to school meals and eating habits is not effective.

That is why Cuneen's 8-week Fresh from the Farm program includes classroom visits from farmers, tastings, cooking demonstrations, expeditions to local organic farms and help creating a school garden.

"The tastings part of the curriculum has been extremely popular and effective," Cuneen said, "and local farm expeditions where children have had the opportunity to eat broccoli and other vegetables off the plant have been absolutely transformative.

"And, of course, pulling 'hidden' root vegetables out of the ground that the children have planted in their own school gardens has helped to create new relationships between the kids and these foods."

Common Threads, a cultural and food education nonprofit started by chef Art Smith, works in 55 mostly low-income Chicago communities to bring cooking classes and cultural lessons to youngsters.

On a recent rainy afternoon, Hana Kim, 9, was zesting a lemon for a South African curry as part of her 12-week Common Threads cooking class.

"I've learned how to cut and zest and make all sorts of new recipes," the third-grader said. "I make them with my mom and sister so we can eat healthier stuff and not so much junk food."

Common Threads classmates (mostly kids in fourth to sixth grades) chopped rutabagas, potatoes and onions like pros as they bragged about their newfound ability to make sushi, cupcakes and pasta in unique shapes. Before diving into the recipes, students displayed their knowledge of spices, produce and food from other cultures as they engaged in a 20-Questions-like game for which the answer was cardamom.

Dennis Ryan's Fresh Connections program joins with Common Threads to offer workshops that help kids understand local sustainable produce. The tasting and cooking sessions often finish with the distribution of "market dollars," coupons kids use at the 61st Street Farmers Market in Woodlawn, which Ryan runs.

The Good Food Project, run by local food writer Susan Taylor, offers classroom tastings to help kids learn varieties of apples and other foods, plus how to become "food critics." The kids often get coupons for apples to take home to their families.

"The GFP has a very strong mandate that we do not criticize children for their food choices. We are not the food police, but rather our job is to introduce children to great-tasting real food and to help them gain access to it," Taylor said. The tastings take a lesson from the junk food industry, which uses "fun" to sell, but the tastings "introduce children to the exquisite flavors of real food to help them to develop their palates, develop a lifelong love of good food and enjoy the benefits of a healthy life."

Gorilla Gourmet delivers about 1,000 organic lunches to students throughout the Chicago area and also cooking classes and earth boxes that allow "you plant almost any vegetable seed and water it, and it will grow because there is an irrigation system under it, so if you forget to water it for a while, it will still be fine," said Jason Weedon co-founder and CEO.

Many of these organizations say that after the programs, they've found increased interest in nutrition, food from other cultures, behavioral changes and eating together as a family.

They and the U.S. Department of Agriculture agree healthy food in the lunchroom needs to reinforce nutrition lessons. To help with the effort and in conjunction with Michelle Obama's anti-obesity initiative, the USDA recently announced the HealthierUS School Challenge, which offers financial rewards to schools that meet the standards of its four-tiered program to improve school food nutrition, recess time, physical education and nutrition education.

CPS officials have announced their desire to try to gain gold status, the next-to-the-highest, for some schools. But they stop short of setting number targets.

"We are at the beginning phase of this project," said spokeswoman Monique Bond. "It would be premature to set expectations. It is important to have a framework that supports our health goals and nutrition standards. During its initial phase, this program should be embraced as an initiative, not a mandate."

The question remains, though: Will kids eat it? We'll find out in the fall, when CPS rolls out its new menu to the whole district.

Copyright © 2010, [Chicago Tribune](#)